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ABSTRACT

This case study examines a 2-year faculty-centered professional development program for high school teachers. The program, which used a Foxfire approach (Wigginton, 1986) and was based on Deweyan principles (Dewey, 1963), involved having the teachers initiate, pursue, and share self-selected, independent group learning projects. Inservice sessions were facilitated by two professors from an affiliated university, with the goals of building a sense of community among faculty and engaging teachers as learners in a cooperative learning experience built upon democratic principles. Study groups were formed. Groups gathered materials, read, discussed, consulted leaders in the field, and visited other schools and then reported their findings to other faculty. Interviews with 13 teachers and 3 administrators and analysis of inservice evaluation data revealed that: most faculty had positive feelings about the inservice programs, collegiality and professional respect had increased, and new information was being applied in the classroom. Most teachers enjoyed becoming learners again and felt their projects would bring about positive change. The inservice program supported John Dewey's theories that the primary factor contributing to growth is the quality of the experience for its own sake and for further growth and future experience, and that interaction and continuity must occur. (JDD)

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Facilitating Professional Development: Foundational Strategies

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The traditional role of faculty in educational foundations has been to critique schools from a scholarly distance. Changes in the role of higher education are now challenging that tradition. Public criticism of institutions of higher education for their lack of involvement with their community has resulted in colleges of education beginning to develop stronger connections to local schools, encouraging their faculty members to assist in this endeavor. Several questions arise. Should faculty in educational foundations be involved in such school activities? If so, how can they participate and promote foundational work at the same time?

As a historian of education with a social activist agenda, I believe that faculty in educational foundations should be involved in school restructuring so that insights from the field of foundations may enter the world of teachers and students. In addition, a better understanding of the world of practice will only deepen and authenticate the critique by faculty in educational foundations.

This case study examines a two-year faculty-centered professional development program created by two foundations scholars using a Foxfire approach (Wigginton, 1986) and based upon Deweyan principles (Dewey, 1963) for a group of high school teachers who initiated, pursued, and shared self-selected, independent group learning projects. This paper will discuss the Foxfire strategies and the teacher study groups, as well as report the outcomes related to the school's restructuring goals based upon in-service evaluations, surveys, interviews, and observational notes.

Introduction

In the past five years there has been a change in the traditional bureaucracy in America. Businesses have begun to use a model of decision making that solicits employee suggestions and empowers employee groups to analyze their problems and to create solutions. The restructuring movement in education, which is intended to be a fundamental change rather than just a reform movement, encourages the same decentralization of traditional authority and empowers teachers by giving them more voice in deciding how best to meet their students' needs (Little, 1986; MaLaughlin, 1991).

In the 1970s staff development in schools reflected the traditional bureaucratic approach whereby administrators selected experts to address teachers about innovations in teaching that they deemed important. This hierarchical approach was not effective and did not produce any major changes in teaching, as anyone who had to attend workshops from one hour to several days in duration knows.[1]

Now teachers are bring empowered to direct their own professional development programs to assess and select the change strategies that will best suit their school and students. Some school districts, often under the leadership of the teachers' union, have created teacher resource centers that provide professional development based upon teacher needs and requests.

In other school districts teacher committees provide leadership for the faculty in professional development. The school identified here as Midland High School has become actively engaged in restructuring and has created a teacher committee to plan and implement in-services for professional development.

Initial Restructuring Efforts

Midland High School is a comprehensive high school in rural Midwest, with approximately 600 students and 45 faculty members. The veteran Midland High School teachers had experienced their share of new theories and had mixed emotions in the spring of 1992 when they were asked again to consider a change. Many were feeling burnt out and morale was low. Nevertheless the teachers decided that they needed change and wanted to become involved in restructuring efforts. The school became a Professional Development School (PDS) for the local university and was also chosen as one of the state's select sites for restructuring.

In the fall of 1993 the School Improvement Team (SIT), a faculty committee charged with planning professional development, was created. Never before had Midland High School teachers been involved in school-sponsored professional development because the state did not require such programs; rather, teachers had always charted their own independent professional improvement either through graduate courses or through their own professional associations. The SIT committee was chaired by a teacher, here identified as Ms. Jones, who had taken a Foxfire course at the local university.

Ms. Jones proposed to the committee members that they consider a democratic, project-centered approach to professional development and she invited university professors, Terry O'Connor and Susan Martin, to facilitate several SIT committee meetings to help members decide how they wanted to plan their professional development release time for the Spring of 1993 to support the school's restructuring efforts. The SIT committee decided, somewhat hesitatingly, to initiate the democratic, project-centered approach with O'Connor and Martin providing the structural framework and limited supervision of the program. Self-selected groups of faculty would investigate topics of their choice that they felt would lead to school improvement.

The basic goals of the in-service were to build a sense of community among faculty and to engage teachers as learners in a cooperative learning experience built upon democratic principles. It was also hoped that teachers would incorporate into their classes some of the new ideas generated by the study groups. Wigginton's words, "Teachers need to learn and be rewarded and praised... just like their students," (214) described the goals for the Midland High School teachers.

The goals of the first in-service were to engage the faculty in a dialogue regarding about their experiences in school. To break up the normal faculty meeting seating arrangements, the SIT committee members mixed the teachers at different tables. The extent of conversation in these random groups was limited at that first meeting. With the faculty in small groups, O'Connor and

Martin conducted several activities that encouraged them to think outside of the normal routine about ways to improve school. The choice of activates reflected the Foxfire core principle that all work must flow from the students' desires and concerns based upon their present day experiences and that the role of the teacher is to be a team leader and guide.[2] By the end of the two and one-half hour session the teachers had generated eighteen pages of ideas.

In the second in-service O'Connor and Martin conducted activities that helped faculty members to choose their topic of study and to form project groups based upon the Foxfire principle that all work is characterized by student action rather than passive receipt of information and on a core principle that the work is best conducted by small groups that emphasize peer teaching. The faculty formed six groups and began to formulate plans for their project--to be shared with the faculty at large.

To become knowledgeable in their chosen areas, the groups worked independently during the spring to gather materials, to read, to discuss, to consult leaders in the field, and to visit other schools At the last in-service of the year all groups reported their project plans. Something had definitely happened to the faculty that spring of 1993. As one teacher remarked, "Listen to all this talk! It's quite a change!"

That comment followed by energized reports from the groups validated the power of the democratic principle as articulated by Dewey:

> Democratic social arrangements promote a better quality of human experience, one which is more widely accessible and enjoyed, than do non-democratic and anti-democratic forms of social life. Does not the principle of regard for individual freedom and for decency...(contribute) to a higher quality of experience on the part of a greater number than are the methods of repression and coercion or force? (Dewey, p. 34)

During the 1993-94 academic year the teacher groups shared their knowledge and experiences with their colleagues, offering a smorgasbord of new ideas and strategies during six in-services in the fashion of the Foxfire core principle that new activities should "spiral gracefully out of the old."

In the spring of 1994 Ms. Jones and I decided to conduct collaborative research to assess the impact of the year and a half teacher-centered professional development program on teacher attitudes and behavior. In addition we solicited faculty input regarding future needs for professional development. The SIT committee had collected evaluation sheets at the end of all the formal in-services but had only briefly looked at them. Clearly the Foxfire principle that calls for "unstintingly honest ongoing evaluation" had only been met at a superficial level.

To conduct our research we interviewed twelve teachers and

three administrators, analyzed teacher evaluations of individual in-service activities, and compared two annual in-service surveys. The findings indicate that: 1) most faculty members feel positively about the in-service programs, 2) collegiality and professional respect have increased dramatically, and 3) many teachers are using their new information and strategies in their classrooms. In other words, the goals of the in-service have been met. The faculty also articulated their concerns about the direction of restructuring efforts. The next three sections will detail these findings related to Teacher as Learner, Collegiality, and Faculty Concerns and Future Direction.

Teacher as Learner

The first goal of the spring 1993 in-service had been to give the teachers an opportunity to become learners again. On the 1993 year-end, in-service survey (1993 Survey), almost all the teachers responded with enthusiasm (95%) regarding the initial progress of the ten-week professional development program, which one teacher described as a "good building process."

Most faculty members (86%) enjoyed becoming learners again. "We have had the opportunity to be students and study something that interested us," one teacher noted while another stated, "It's been exciting and rewarding to see people interact and work on issues that will benefit the school. Our staff has great ideas, but we have never had the time to discuss them, let alone implement them." Almost all (97%) indicated that they believed their group projects would bring about positive change. One teacher commented, "We all knew we needed a change and we were doing small things ourselves but didn't know if they would bring a big difference.... (now) There's a sense of hope and of possibilities of trying other things."

The democratic nature of the group projects has had positive ramifications. As one teacher commented, "If you try to force teachers who have been used to their own way, they are going to put a wall... but it's (group projects) been presented pretty well as a way to change." Teachers began to try new things during the spring of 1993. Some teachers (71%) indicated that the process of choosing a project suggested new ways of teaching and 67% indicated that they had begun to transfer their newly acquired skills to their classes.

Using new information and trying new skills involves risk-taking. "At first some people were afraid to do different things in their teaching," one teacher commented but, according to another, working in groups "gave people the courage to try new things, accept uncertainty, be on a teeter-totter...(we) need time to explore and investigate, and get comfortable with the risk factors to make some of the changes that will be valuable to us." The outcomes of the risk-taking have been positive for some. Describing himself as formerly a "very strict lecturer," one teacher who tried cooperative learning commented that "it's more work but it's worth it...The whole change process has helped...I've changed."

When asked about the disadvantages of the group projects, some teachers (25%) noted problems such as absence of some individuals, unequal effort, decision-making difficulties, and lack of focus--all common difficulties associated with cooperative learning. Not everyone enjoyed becoming learners, however. From among the dissatisfied 2% came the comment, "I would prefer to listen to others about what has worked for them instead of us (the faculty) doing most of the work."

During the 1993/94 in-services, groups became resources for each other as they shared their new knowledge and strategies in such areas as cooperative learning, learning styles, and relating students' studies to the world of work. A comparison of the two annual in-service surveys from 1993 and 1994 reveals that the percentage of teachers who indicated that they felt the staff was growing as learners increased from 86% to 96% and the percentage who had transferred new skills to their classrooms increased from 67% to 75%. One teacher remarked, "It's finally starting to gain momentum and people see that change is not so scary. We want to change--not because its the thing to do but because we need to." Clearly the teachers have benefitted from their year and a half as learners.

Collegiality

As teachers learned together they built a strong bond of collegiality, both personal and professional, that countered the previous isolation of working in separate areas of a large, consolidated high school. In the 1993 Survey almost all the faculty noted increased collegiality (97%) as the main area of progress that "brought teachers closer together." One teacher wrote, "We have gotten to know each other as people and not just as teachers." Many teachers cited the opportunities to discuss shared concerns and to hear multiple perspectives as important advantages gained from their group project experiences. One teacher noted the value of "learning what others are thinking even if we do not agree." The dialogue has begun between teachers with unique views but with a shared commitment to their school.

Teachers also grew to value each other's contributions to the school. "We have a lot of resources in this school that we haven't recognized," one teacher wrote. Another teacher observed, "The way the staff views itself is different. I think that's one of the most positive factors. There's a greater appreciation between departments, disciplines, and individuals."

This collegiality and increased communication directly supported school restructuring. Even though some teachers mentioned that change would be difficult, the majority of the staff believe that it is needed. Collegiality will provide a foundation for restructuring because, as another teacher stated, "We need each other to make change successful." Some teachers also reported more positive attitudes after the spring in-service ended, noting that they felt more confident, hopeful, and energized.

The collegiality continued to grow in 1993-94 as indicated

by 88% of the teachers on the 1994 year-end, in-service survey (1994 Survey). Almost all of the individuals interviewed, both teachers and administrators, commented positively about the sense of collegiality evident in increased communication, involvement, and support between individuals, departments, and administration. One teacher described the "scary process" of trying cooperative learning for the first time and how he sought help from a colleague. He said that two years earlier he wouldn't have known whose help to seek because he didn't know his colleagues well enough.

Many teachers indicated that they felt more motivated, more supported by colleagues, and more connected to the staff. One teacher remarked that "there are many more smiles, and even in difficult times, you can just look at another teacher and know there's support." The climate of the school was generally considered to be improved. Many teachers indicated in the 1994 Survey that they had a more positive attitude about teaching (84%) and the students (80%). One teacher stated that "the reason classes are better is because teachers are getting along better and doing things together for the students ... and not because someone else is saying to do this."

Not all teachers expressed positive reactions to the in-service programs. A few teachers (10%) indicated in the 1994 Survey that they felt pressured, neglected, or criticized . One teacher commented, "I felt that I should change some of the ways I do class activities. Everyone seems to be really big on group work but I find that it doesn't work." Another stated, "I felt pressured to change things when I felt I was accomplishing something by doing things my way." It is natural and to be expected that not all teachers are going to "jump on the band-wagon" of trying new strategies that are counter to their practices. Change occurs, both individually and institutionally, in incremental steps within the comfort level of the participants. The collegiality and respect that has been developed at Midland High School will hopefully create an environment of acceptance for all members and continued support for those involved in change efforts.

Faculty Concerns and Future Direction

When asked their concerns about restructuring on the 1994 Survey, some teachers (25%) indicated a concern about adequate resources including time, equipment, and money. Others responded (20%) that they did not see any general need for change or that other groups besides teachers needed to change. The largest group (55%) expressed concerns about the process of change including a need for goals, direction, and vision, as well as action and evaluation of progress. The following section will respond to the concerns of the largest group.

How does change occur? What is the best method of approaching it? Three teachers interviewed provide multiple perspectives.

Teacher 1: I like to see the problem and then we find

a solution. It looks like we're posing the solution and we still haven't defined the problem.... We should have started out saying, What's wrong with our school? What's right with our school?

Teacher 2: Change occurs slowly. Teachers have to sit down and feel that they have some input into the direction they're going and then do little things to encourage people to go in those directions.

Teacher 3: We're probably moving as fast as we can to get everyone involved. Just the little things we've accomplished, the cooperative learning and teachers talking have been positive steps.... if we keep making little steps like that we'll be in good shape.

Teacher 1 has a valid point regarding problem identification and resolution strategies as necessary components of institutional change, but these steps occur repeatedly throughout any effort to make change and the answers evolve as the faculty engages in dialogue and action. Teachers 2 and 3 touch upon the heart of change; that is, the necessity to move slowly in an effort to encourage and support participants in their growth. By using the words "little things" and "little steps," they also reveal that change is an incremental process and not a product for both individuals and institutions.

These three Midland High School teachers have hit upon some core issues related to change. Primarily, change is a highly personal process that results primarily from the evolution of the individual who passes through developmental stages in both perceptions and skills. Collegiality nurtures change but there is also an omnipresent individualism that produces a natural tension in the change process (Fullan, 1990; Hall and Hord, 1987). Rather than suppressing critique or dissent, individuals involved in change must use dialogue to hear each other's positions.

Where to go from here? The concerns of those teachers (for more attention to problem identification, goals, strategies, evaluation, etc.) focus on institutional change. In the next year Midland High School will address these issues as part of the Performance Based Assessment (PBA) required by the state. Because of their experiences in the last two years, Midland High School teachers have forged a collegial bond based upon respect, acceptance, and support in their roles as learners and innovators. In the 1994-95 school year the faculty will re-examine the school's mission statement and will study their practices in light of their mission, working together to address school-wide concerns. Their collegiality and experiences as learners over the last two years will give them a different perspective of their school and should support the Midland High School faculty and administrators in their next step of change.

Conclusion: Reflections from a Deweyan Perspective

Dewey wrote that "the self is not ready-made, but something in continuous formation through choice and action" (1916, p. 48). People find themselves in their work, through their interest in that work. Throughout the past two years the faculty at Midland High School has engaged in activities, both in formal in-service and through informal contacts of a professional nature. Because of the personal and professional collegiality that has evolved, the school climate has been transformed from one of low teacher morale to one where teachers support each other in their change efforts. The faculty members at Midland High School have, over the past two years, been re-making themselves as individuals and as a group because of their willingness to engage in the change process.

According the Dewey's (1938/1963) theory of experience as related to learning, the primary factor that contributes to growth is the quality of the experience for its own sake and for further growth and future experience. Clearly most Midland High School faculty members perceived their learning experiences in the group projects as valuable both to themselves as individuals, to their colleagues, and to the students. The faculty had also experienced the freedom of intelligence that Dewey regards as crucial by exercising their observation and judgment for goals that are intrinsically worthwhile. Their efforts to try new strategies for themselves and the joy expressed by those who felt support from colleagues indicates that many of the faculty experienced this freedom. No one was forcing them to change--it was their choice.

For growth to occur, Dewey argues that interaction and continuity must occur. By interaction Dewey means the involvement of student and the objective world of knowledge, observation, memory, and imagination. The in-service began with faculty members examining their own professional environment to choose projects that would help them to either solve school problems or to learn new skills that would improve their teaching. Faculty members then engaged in a high level of interaction with each other, outside experts, and other schools. some growth occurred as a result of interaction as faculty members gained knowledge and learned new skills.

Continuity implies that experiences must build upon each other, connecting the student's personal experience to future ones. There was continuity within the groups as they progressed in their projects. They anticipated that their new knowledge and skills would lead to positive future changes in the school. When faculty members shared their knowledge and skills in the 1993-94 year, they presented their findings in six separate in-services that were not interrelated. There was not continuity between these six in-services, which frustrated some of the faculty members as has been shown. If the academic year is taken as a stage of growth and part of the change process, then it was a time of broad exposure to a variety of new strategies from which teachers could choose, if they so desired. From this

perspective there is some continuity.

This project does falters in another area. A teacher who uses Foxfire's core principles, which are built upon Deweyan pragmatism, monitors student's intellectual and social development with the goal of insuring continuous growth experiences. Because there was no "teacher" to perform these functions for the faculty as learners at Midland High School. O'Connor and Martin had structured the spring in-service but were not invited to be involved in planning during the second year, although Martin did attend several in-services when the groups presented their project learnings.

The SIT committee, faculty members with full teaching loads who donate inordinate hours of their time for this work, did not use the evaluative materials that they collected. They did not have the time, the energy, or the training to be the Foxfire "teacher." As a result of the collaborative research, it became clear that the faculty needed assistance to move to the next stage of development. Ms. Jones convinced the SIT committee and the administration that help was needed. O'Connor and Martin were invited to help the SIT committee plan the in-service for 1994-95 when the faculty and administration will engage in a major self-evaluation that should help them to clarify the next step that they want to take in their journey of change.

Returning to the original concern about faculty from educational foundations becoming active in schools, I must say that being involved in this project and helping a faculty participate in a democratic process has been exciting. As an outsider I can see how the teachers have been empowered and energized by their engagement with material of their own choice. I would have welcomed this democratic approach to professional development as a teacher in the late 1970s rather than the top-down model that prevailed at that time because I, like many others, was accustomed to being a passive recipient of knowledge and the power of others. Through this project, teachers have come to touch the heart of the American foundation--democracy. It is my hope that this faculty will continue to engage in the change process to the point where many are willing to share this type of democratic learning with their students. In this way the original mission of the social reconstructionists in the 1920s and 1930s to have teachers change society through their teaching may come closer to realization.

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1. The author, a teacher in the 1970s and an administrator in the early 1980s, writes this from personal experience.

2. See the Appendix A for the Fox Fire core principles.